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CIA aide admits role in contra arms shipment

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WASHINGTON — The head of the CIA's Central American task force told congressional investigators that he had stretched his legal authority to assist the rebels in Nicaragua, and that Lt. Col. Oliver North had manipulated and deceived him to achieve the same end.

Alan Fiers, whose closed-door testimony before the congressional Iran-contra committees was released yesterday after being edited for sensitive references, also said that during appearances late last year he had misled Congress about his knowledge of operations in support of the Nicaraguan rebels. He said he and other officials had done so not by lying, but through omission and by telling technical truths that evaded the substance of questions.

During one session, Fiers acknowledged that he sat by silently as two superiors, CIA Deputy Director Clair George and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, gave evasive replies that Fiers called "cute."

Fiers expressed regret for having been deceptive but said he had been trying to protect and serve his government while staying within the law. He said the White House could have avoided putting him and others in a "bind" by being forthcoming with what it knew, and he added that he was "bitter about ... the administration for hanging us out."

"Conspiracy of silence"

His comments led Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine) to argue that there had been "a conspiracy of silence, of CIA officials who came before the committees and each had this silent vow not to be the first one to step forward." Beginning last October, the downing of a plane carrying Eugene Hasenfus led congressional committees to quiz administration and CIA officials about US involvement in the secret contra-resupply network.

The transcript of Fiers' interrogation contains portions that are blacked out for security reasons; his name is among the items deleted, but sources confirmed that it was his testimony. Other CIA officials, including George, also were interviewed privately this month; edited transcripts of their comments are scheduled for release as early as today.

Fiers assumed his job on Oct. 9, 1984, two days before the signing of the Boland Amendment cutting off most American assistance to the rebels. He said he was acutely aware of the highly charged political atmosphere he was entering — he repeatedly called it a "nutcracker" — and said he always tried to remain within legal bounds.

Early the next year, however, he said, he went too far by providing assistance so that military equipment could be shipped to the contras on planes that also contained humanitarian aid.

"A little too rambunctious"

"By my own admission, if I got someplace that is controversial, it was in February and March, where I let the reins out, I got a little too rambunctious, like a colt that got out of the barn to play," Fiers said. Quickly thereafter, he asserted, he realized his error and "pulled myself back in."

Asked whether he had provided intelligence material to North for the contras, as the Marine officer testified, Fiers said he might have on infrequent occasions but tried to stay within the law. He said that, since North was the key operative for the contras on the National Security Council, the two men worked closely and North was entitled to some important information.

However, Fiers said, North apparently manipulated situations to get data for the rebels without revealing what it was for, especially when Fiers first took his job and did not fully grasp the situation. He said North often asked for material that he did not receive

and sometimes exaggerated to get what he wanted.

"If I had delivered a map to Oliver North," Fiers said, "... it would have been because Oliver North said I need this to brief the president, and that is the way he dealt, bombastically, and you would push and push and push, and the decision I had to make each time ... was whether or not it was for his NSC job or something else."

Questioned North's words

Later, asked by Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) whether he believed North's testimony to Congress, Fiers responded in part: "I never knew Colonel North to be an absolute liar, but I never took anything he said at face value because I knew that he was bombastic and embellished the record and threw curves, speed balls and spit balls to get what he wanted."

Fiers said his suspicions grew throughout 1986 but he did not confront North except to ask him several times whether he was certain his activities were legal. He said North assured him they were.

Even after North began "flashing out neon signs" about his efforts to help in the construction of a secret air field in Costa Rica, Fiers said he chose to look the other way. "I once again, rightly or wrongly ... took the position: I don't want to know that, I don't want to get involved with it," he said.

Fiers said that, in November 1986, he became so concerned about North that he talked to his supervisor, who took up the matter with George. Fiers said George discussed the issue with Casey, who convened a meeting with the four men.

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At the meeting, Fiers said, Casey asked North: "Ollie, are you operating in Central America?" North reportedly replied that he was not. North testified that Casey knew about virtually all of his work on behalf of the contras.

Fiers said he told his subordinates working in Central America to stay within the law, sometimes by remaining ignorant of events so they could not be accused of participating in them. Some of the agency's officials in the region nevertheless reportedly did assist North in his efforts.